

Our Intelligence in Vietnam, And Why It

By STEPHEN E. AMBROSE

HOW can our intelligence be so miserably, consistently bad? Between them, the CIA and the intelligence branches of the three armed services have a budget that probably exceeds the GNP of North Vietnam. They have agents everywhere, extensive and sophisticated lines of communications to get information back to headquarters, the most modern and complex computers to sift and analyze the raw material, and the best brains in the country to read the computer feed-outs and explain the big picture. There is precious little romance in the process, as in the old days of spying, but our information gathering and evaluation techniques represent the culmination of modern American technology. We have committed our best tools and our best men, and we have failed.

It has been so from the beginning. In 1965 the Air Force informed the President that its intelligence indicated that a few weeks of bombing in North Vietnam would bring the enemy to his knees. In 1965 and 1967 Army intelligence concentrated on the infra-structure of the enemy in the villages. Isolate the Viet Cong, the formula ran, and the rebellion will dry up. Unfortunately for the Army, for every V.C. identified and eliminated, two more sprang up. During the same period Air Force intelligence indicated that the bombing campaign was destroying North Vietnam's ability to fight, while the interdiction bombing in Laos and Cambodia had made it impossible for the enemy to get supplies into South Vietnam. The CIA and the services used every index they could invent—all pointed to the collapse of the enemy. When McNamara and Rusk and Johnson told us we had turned the corner, or spoke of light at the end of the tunnel, they were not whistling in the dark. They based their optimistic predictions on absolutely complete, absolutely reliable information. The enemy had no offensive capacity left and would soon wither away.

Then came Tet. It was an intelligence disaster of an order of magnitude equaled only by Pearl Harbor and MacArthur's assurance that the Chinese would not enter the Korean war even if American troops marched to the Yalu. Tet was one of the few major, widespread ground offensives in human history to catch the defenders completely by surprise.

The American response was not to reevaluate the technique, but to step it up. We sent in or bought additional agents, created better communications, added more computers, and set up extra committees in Saigon and the Pentagon to collate everything. We built incredible devices to find out where the enemy was—devices that could, for example, take the temperature of an area and on that basis indicate whether there were human beings gathered together under the jungle cover. We flew reconnaissance missions all over Indochina, taking millions of photographs with cameras so sensitive that they could pick up the numbers on an auto license plate from 10,000 feet and more.

Armed with all this information, the intelligence people went to Nixon and said we had a great opportunity at hand. The North Vietnamese were concentrated in a few narrow areas of Cambodia. Foolishly, they had even placed their command headquarters for the entire war near the Cambodian border. COSVN, the intelligence people said it was called. We could pick off the nerve center of the entire enemy war effort in a short campaign and, if not end the war, at least buy time in which to prepare the ARVN to fight the battles. Nixon believed, and who can blame him? The best intelligence service in the world was positive.

So the President went on television to speak of Stalingrad and the Bulge and other great battles. He told the American people their sons were about to win a victory that would be just as decisive. He explained

COSVN in detail and then outlined the process whereby our troops were going to surround and capture great numbers of the enemy, in an operation comparable only to the German blitzkrieg in Poland, France, and Russia.

When he next appeared on television, the President showed us movies highlighting the results of the Cambodian invasion. We had captured some rice and a few small arms. He did not mention COSVN or enemy troops. A few months later, American intelligence thought it spotted a PW camp, so we raided North Vietnam—and again came up with nothing.

Now comes Laos. Intelligence had finally figured out that the stupendous interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail had not worked. Still there was hope. American intelligence sources indicated that the North Vietnamese were weak, while ARVN was growing stronger. With a little American air support, ARVN could move into Laos and physically occupy the trail, thus cutting the enemy supply line completely. The results of this latest blunder are too painful to discuss.

How could it happen? The men involved in the intelligence process are not stupid, the technology they have at their disposal does work. Everyone involved in the system works long, hard hours. They know that men's lives depend on the accuracy of the information they gather, so they check and double-check everything. Yet they are always wrong.

One factor, of course, is common to all spying. Men believe what they want to believe—the classic example is Jack Kennedy's belief in the CIA's assertion that the Cuban people were thoroughly anti-Castro

Doesn't Work

and would rise up against him at the first small sign of outside support, such as a landing at the Bay of Pigs.

The more important factor is in the broadest sense political. No one, not even we Americans, has yet devised a method of gathering intelligence that can operate without the support of the people. The Battle of the Bulge could never have occurred in France, for example, because while Eisenhower's armies were operating in France his intelligence was superb. He always knew where the Germans were and what they were up to, for the simple reason that the Germans could not hide their movements from the people of France, and the vast majority of Frenchmen wanted the Allies to win. Thus they reported, accurately and truthfully, what they saw.

When Ike's armies got to the German border, they lost this advantage, which allowed the Germans to mount a secret attack.

In a war zone, people give information to the side they want to win—that is, they make a political choice. Nothing provides quite so clear or conclusive an answer to the question—whose side is the ordinary Vietnamese on?—than the failure of our intelligence. Every time a Vietnamese peasant tells the truth to the Viet Cong or lies to the Americans, he is casting a vote—the only vote that counts. No intelligence service in the CIA can operate successfully such a situation, not even